

# POLICYBRIEF

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## Can the EU Really Lead the Way?

### Rethinking Green Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific

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#### Introduction: EU's Ambition and the Challenge of Climate Leadership

The EU wants to lead the world in green action, but it is facing challenges. Given its previous leadership obligation as an earlier industrialized region to mobilize climate finance for developing countries and regions (UNFCCC, 2015), the European Green Deal (2019) reinitiated its leadership ambition to engage and support partners in taking their share of reducing global carbon emissions and promoting sustainable development. However, the recent move back towards fossil fuels and the intensifying global energy competition blur the aim to take the lead of its green vision to the world.

To enhance their global green leadership, and competitiveness in the clean energy market at the same time, the EU must work together with partner countries and regions. For a better green partnership, the EU's green leadership strategy should reflect the symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers while shifting its leader-centric view toward a follower's perspective (Busby & Urpelainen, 2020; De Moras & Schockman, 2023; Wurzel et al., 2018). Not all partners of the EU's global green initiatives are equally capable of following the EU, depending on their given resources and/or bureaucratic capacity. And the ability to facilitate followership is key to effective leadership.

#### Highlights

**EU's Limited Success:** The EU's efforts to lead the green transition in the Asia-Pacific region are not as effective as intended. Partnerships often lack depth and fail to generate real action.

**Importance of Tailored Approaches:** The EU needs to recognize the diversity within the Asia-Pacific region. Countries have different capacities and motivations for engaging in green initiatives.

**Need for Action-Oriented Strategies:** Current EU agreements often lack specific plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and may prioritize economic benefits over concrete environmental outcomes.

#### Recommendations for Improvement:

- The EU should develop tailored action plans that consider the specific needs and circumstances of each partner country.
- The EU should support climate education and knowledge development in the Asia-Pacific region.
- The EU should invest in improving its understanding of the diverse contexts within the Asia-Pacific region to foster more effective collaboration.

## The EU's Current Approach in Asia Pacific: A Review

This policy brief deals with the EU's green leadership strategy in Asia Pacific. It examines the EU climate partnership practices, green diplomacy, and trade agreements on sustainable development with 15 membership countries of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This includes the existing ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) trade bloc, together with five other East Asian economies - China, Korea, and Japan (commonly referred to as ASEAN+3), Australia, and New Zealand (commonly referred to as ASEAN+5) (European Parliament, 2021).

On top of the growing importance of Asia Pacific for the EU, underpinned by EU's strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2021) (European Commission, 2021), the region accounts for the largest amount of carbon emissions worldwide, the largest global GDP share, as well as the high vulnerability to climate change impacts. The launch of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020, which is a free trade agreement among the Asia Pacific countries, made the region the largest trade bloc in history. Thus, encouraging the region's green and sustainable transitions both at the domestic and regional level becomes indispensable for the EU's global green leadership aim.

For the analysis of followership types, data from Climate Action Trackers Net-Zero Target evaluations and the status of green party representation of each country was used to estimate the level of political mobilization (Climate Action Tracker, 2023). The collected EU green partnership and strategy documents are listed in Table 1.

## Why Partnerships Fall Short: Understanding the Barriers to Green Action

The EU's green leadership strategy in Asia Pacific is still unilateral, not taking the partners' capabilities to follow into account. Moreover, most of its green diplomacy and partnership agreements define the areas of cooperation and the mutual goals at a generic level without clear follow-up on policy implementation in the partner countries. To re-strategize the EU's green leadership in Asia Pacific, the followership types in the region should be considered in addition to the partners' political and socio-economic status.

Depending on a country's level of environmental mobilization, e.g. green party representation, and the level of state capacity, Busby and Urpelainen (2020) suggested four types of followership - "Enthusiasts," "Reluctants," "Pliables," and "Hard Nuts." The EU's green partners in Asia Pacific lack either high environmental mobilization, state capacity, or both. The most prevailing type of follower across all sub-groups of RCEP is 'Hard Nuts'. Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea show the 'Reluctant' followership type, whereas New Zealand is 'Pilable.'

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Hard Nuts need support for capacity building and either domestic political mobilization or material incentives/coercion. Reluctants, on the other hand, need both domestic political mobilization and material incentives/coercion. This means that voluntary following action from the partner side in Asia Pacific is difficult to expect despite the EU's initiatives on green partnership and sustainable trade agreements. Thus, the EU needs to do more to help and encourage countries in the region to take green action.

## Missing the Mark: Not Enough Support for Green Action

It is clear from the lack of 'enthusiastic' followers in Asia Pacific that environmental awareness and the push for environmental issues to become a significant political priority are generally lower in the region than in the EU. While some countries that are 'reluctant' to follow the EU's lead, such as South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam, have the ability to make green changes, the EU needs to take a more active role in encouraging political change and public support for these changes within those countries.

To work effectively with countries in Asia Pacific on green issues, the EU needs to create more tailored approaches. This means having one strategy for the 'Hard Nut' emerging economies in ASEAN and another for more developed countries like China, Japan and Australia. These strategies must take into account the distinct features of each group. It is particularly challenging for the EU to encourage political

Nr.	Country	Bilateral Green Partnerships	Global Gateway strategy and flagship projects related to green initiatives	EU FTA Sustainable Development Charter
<b>ASEAN</b>				
1	Brunei	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	Cambodia	Team Europe Initiative (green energy and industrial value chains; sustainable landscapes, forests and agriculture) and Joint Programming (JES 2021-2027)	Water treatment plant in Phnom Penh	N/A
3	Indonesia	Just Energy Transition Partnership	Energy and Sustainable Value Chains	Proposed TSD Chapter
4	Lao PDR	Team Europe Initiative and Joint Programming	Increasing investment, connectivity and trade in agriculture and forestry	N/A
5	Malaysia	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement	N/A	N/A; Sustainability Impact Assessment
6	Myanmar	N/A	N/A	N/A; Sustainability Impact Assessment
7	Singapore	N/A	N/A	Singapore - Chapter 12
8	Thailand	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement	Green Economy	Proposed TSD Chapter
9	The Philippines	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement; Team Europe Initiative and Joint Programming	N/A	N/A; Sustainability Impact Assessment
10	Vietnam	Just Energy Transition Partnership; Team Europe Initiative and Joint Programming	Bac Ai pumped hydro storage project; Construction of the Tra Vinh 48 MW nearshore wind farm; Upgrading of Hydropower plant Tri An by 200MV to increase peak capacities	Vietnam – Chapter 13
11	ASEAN (region-to-region)	Global Gateway flagships with ASEAN: the Green Team Europe Initiatives and the Team Europe Initiative on Sustainable Connectivity	N/A	N/A
<b>ASEAN+3</b>				
12	China	Climate Change Partnership; High Level Environment and Climate Dialogue (HECD)	N/A	China - Section IV
13	South Korea	Green Partnership	N/A	South Korea – Chapter 13
14	Japan	Green Alliance	N/A	Japan – Chapter 16
<b>ASEAN+5</b>				
15	Australia	Critical Raw Materials Strategic Partnership	N/A	Proposed TSD Chapter
16	New Zealand	Development Cooperation in the Pacific	N/A	New Zealand – Chapter 19

**Table 1:** The EU's bilateral- and regional green partnerships and strategies with RCEP countries  
**Source:** Data from the European Commission- and EEAS website, compiled by author.

change in major greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters like China, Japan, and Australia, which are high- and upper-middle-income countries. Therefore, using financial rewards or pressure is unlikely to be effective.

The current EU's green diplomacy and leadership strategy emphasizes enhancing cooperation with partners rather than the actual reduction of each country's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Any specified effort to promote sectoral approaches was rare to find. Again, no strategies targeting the major emitters in the region; China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, and Singapore were found either. Instead, the EU has emphasized economic benefits and exchange across the implemented policies. Benefits when following the EU's lead were little emphasized in general, although the urgency and appropriateness of mutual action and benefits of partnership were well acknowledged across the different countries.

### **Putting Business First: Are EU's Economic Interests Getting in the Way?**

Besides carefully considering how to encourage and support its partners' green efforts, the EU must also better coordinate its aid, diplomacy, and trade policies. Improved coordination will enable partners to develop the capabilities needed to go green. But the EU and its Member States' own economic interests are a major factor in launching green partnerships in Asia Pacific at the moment, especially when dealing with the potential followers of the ASEAN emerging economies.

Depending on which type of follower a partner country characterizes as, the EU necessitates different support to boost its followership, such as material incentives/coercion, support for domestic political change, and/or capacity building. For material incentives, EU Global Gateway, Team Europe Initiative, and Just Energy

Transition Partnerships were used. In Joint Programming, FTA Sustainability Charter/Sustainability Impact Assessment, and Green Partnership, domestic political change was encouraged in partner countries, whereas Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and Critical Raw Material Strategic Partnership aims to support the partner countries' capacity building.

For several cases, the EU tried to offer the necessary financial and capacity building support aligned with the countries'

followership types, for example, Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, and South Korea. However, the areas of cooperation and main interests for the mutual partnership with those countries were energy generation (hydro power plant, electricity) and critical mineral and green energy technologies, where the EU's geoeconomic interests are met. Nevertheless, this means the countries whose needs were not matched with the EU's geoeconomic interests were less prioritized for the EU to exert its green leadership.

### **Recommendations for Stronger Climate Partnerships in Asia Pacific**

This policy brief makes three recommendations for the EU to support countries in Asia Pacific with their willingness to work on the green transition. First, the EU should add action plans and follow-ups to its green leadership and diplomatic efforts, tailoring these to each partner's specific situation. Second, the EU should help develop climate education and knowledge in the region. Third, the EU needs to invest in learning more about the specific conditions in each country in Asia Pacific to better coordinate its own policy actions toward the countries and the region.

#### **1. Tailored Strategies: The Need for Detailed Action Plans**

It is difficult to establish a mutually beneficial leader-follower relationship for effective cooperation on the green transition and sustainable growth. This difficulty arises from several factors: vague definitions of the benefits of following the EU's green leadership, limited cooperation areas focused mainly

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on trade, investment, energy security, and value chains due to the EU's emphasis on global clean market competitiveness, and inconsistent implementation of development aid projects. Reflecting the necessitated needs and interests of each partner and providing detailed action plans and follow-up processes on green partnership and related policy implementation will help both sides to exchange their green norms and values more effectively. In terms of the major emitters or industrial economies in the region, more detailed

plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions should be included in the leadership strategy when promoting EU climate policy to them. Furthermore, the EU should call for greater accountability, stronger partnerships, and closer cooperation with them in international negotiations within both bilateral and multilateral organizations.

## 2. Investing in Knowledge: Promoting Climate Education and Skills

To encourage countries in Asia Pacific to follow EU's lead, it must include capacity building support in their current green partnership and leadership strategy. This support should promote both domestic political change and the development of ecological knowledge in partner countries. To achieve this, it is crucial to enhance both country-specific approaches and region-to-region approaches for knowledge and skills exchange, aiming to promote industrial decarbonization and raise environmental awareness. As most of the countries in the region have a weak political driving force to societal change,

EU's understanding and knowledge of the countries and the region of Asia Pacific will help to alleviate this tendency. In this regard, cross-regional exchanges, investments in green transition research, and promoting cultural and public diplomacy in the region must be expanded and supported to strengthen bilateral cooperation and encourage effective followership from partner countries.

## Conclusion: Enhancing the EU's Role in Global Green Transition

Rising geopolitical tensions over global energy competition and political shifts within the EU, put its global green leadership in question. The coupling of industrial and climate policy to inspire commitment and investment in financial flows toward climate policy becomes prevalent, but it puts a strong focus on domestic manufacturing of critical products and national security first. As a result, the external dimensions of the EU's climate agenda, including its green diplomacy, have been weakened. The EU has struggled to

adapt its strategy and scale up financial support for climate efforts in developing countries, as seen in its green partnerships across the Asia-Pacific region.

Moreover, the more successful the implementation of EU's ambitious internal climate policies becomes, the more influence it appears to lose as a structural leader to other

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**The EU, therefore, must engage and collaborate with other countries and regions in the GHG emissions reduction and the green transition movement to ensure its future as a global green leader**

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especially toward a low-carbon and climate resilient economy, the EU should engage with civil society organizations and international organizations to promote environmental movement initiatives and environmental education activities. In this regard, the role of the EU delegations will be crucial for linking different organizational actors and boosting green mobilization at local, national, and regional levels of each country.

## 3. Understanding the Region: The Importance of Context-Specific Knowledge

To better coordinate the EU's activities in Asia Pacific in general, more investment in scientific, educational, and research collaboration between the EU and the Asia Pacific countries is essential. In particular, the EU's limited knowledge of Asia Pacific contributes to unequal relationships with less developed economies in the region when providing and using green financial support. Increasing and deepening the

countries and global actors. This paradoxical situation of the EU in the international climate negotiation fora becomes even more complex in the current post-Kyoto era, where the Paris Agreement encourages members to work together and take urgent climate action, unlike under the previous Kyoto Protocol regime that obliged only developed countries to reduce the GHG emissions. The EU, therefore, must engage and collaborate with other countries and regions in the GHG emissions reduction and the green transition movement to ensure its future as a global green leader.

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